



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

SOME THOUGHTS ON PAIN AND DEATH.

BY H. B. MARRIOTT-WATSON.

THE foundations of Life are laid very deep and intricately, yet they are most precarious; and it is no doubt this very delicacy and elaboration that render them so. Man has ascended out of a remote and somewhat ignoble past by innumerable confluences of blood and nerve and character, and the roots of his life go down into an unknown soil. Yet the strangeness of the situation lies in this, that all this ceremonious life, all this mechanical perfection, the whole of this ancient and slowly evolving design, is built about five small senses. For, lacking the senses, the human body is inconceivable; even to the lowest forms of protoplasm some rudiments of a sense attach. It is to those five open avenues that human life is indebted for its knowledge, its reason, its discoveries, its civilization, which is to say its general progress from an unknown womb. To shut off one of these conduits by which human beings obtain their impressions of the world would be seriously to emasculate the life of any particular person; on the contrary, to add another sense would be to create a new class or order of being which would be manifestly superior to ourselves. This subjection to the senses, this dependence upon them for our relation with external phenomena makes all human knowledge relative. The things-in-themselves of which Plato wrote, and (if we must believe him) of which Socrates spoke, must be the limitation of our senses be forever unknown. All that we can see are these "absolutes" as reflected in five facets. To seize the whole in its truth and entirety would be possible only to a being whose senses were infinite; that is to say, a being whom we are unable to conceive, if not to conjecture.

These senses, then, which are the limit of our knowledge, and

form a system of communication with ourselves, and between one another, must be of necessity paramount in their importance. We depend upon their accuracy for the justice of our impressions, and whilst there is no definite proof that, say, a color or a sound represents to each person the same value or fact, it is a postulate that we must make ere we set forth, if there is to be any argument at all. The frail alleys, one of which at least has fallen long since into disrepair and is but imperfectly used, have been the means of evolution. Piece by piece and parcel by parcel, globule by globule and cell by cell, has the inherited information of the senses built up the human body and the human mind. The great process of evolution asks long periods of time, and geology grants them. A million years in her sight are but as yesterday. So that some time far back, man, endowed now with superior faculties and grown gregarious and social, developed for himself a theory of morals. There is little doubt that the development of a code of morals was of a piece with the progressive movement which has evolved him bodily. There was to be no pause or stay because he had grown upright, walked firmly upon feet and had lost the hair of his body. On the contrary, the vital principle, relieved of the arduous work of constructing a home, fell quickly to the still more difficult and sacred task of developing a proper tenant for that home. In the course of evolution man came, therefore, to shape for himself and his fellows a number of rules which must regulate their social lives. Thus it is that the word "moral" has arisen; for the Latin tongue fully recognized the ultimate derivation of the Roman ethical system. It was founded in its essence on custom; that is, upon those laws which society had considered wise and necessary for the common good. That in different countries and under different skies the moral codes should vary very widely was a natural result of that variation of habit, structure and climate which is one of the main causes of evolution. The utility of the code was the prime necessity. A society of people in its early stages collects about it certain obligations and responsibilities which must be met and undertaken if the tribe is to hold together. The conscience of the tribe will also have reached a certain height and definite religious scruples, sanctions and beliefs will have coagulated in the mind. It is to meet this double condition—the relations of the individual members of the tribe with one another and their

relations with the invisible world—that the ethical system is slowly shaped.

But it would be unwise to suppose that because each people fashioned a system of morality which met its needs, any standing morality prevailing in any part of the world is sufficient, or just, or pure. At the best a nation determines its ethics roughly, hewing them savagely and uncereemoniously out of the block; and there must be many imperfections, even when it is shapeliest to the eye. There is a natural tendency for organic things—creatures as well as the manifestations of creatures—to grow old and out of keeping with their environment. Not only so, but there must be added to this natural process which leads to decay the conservative forces of religion. By these powers is a people bound very rigidly to the rules of its forefathers, whereas there may be no proper correspondence between those laws and the tastes and requirements of the age. It is amazing sometimes to reflect how deeply we are moved by the inhibitions or permissions of a law long since past any usefulness and meet for the dust bin. And even when the incongruity of the law has become so apparent to the public sense that it is a matter of ridicule for the ordinary man, the difficulty of dislodging it from its ancient and venerable place is so great that few are found to attempt the thankless task, and many even to defend the absurdity. To take a trivial example: Some time since the visitors to a popular watering place complained that the authorities compelled the tobacconists to shut their shops on Sundays, whereas boatmen let out their boats, and cabmen their cabs unhindered. The law against Sunday trading still exists, yet it is never enforced because it is felt to be inconsistent with modern feeling. Even the authorities at the watering place of which I speak had but a half-hearted belief in the law, since they would illogically overlook its breaches in the case of some occupations. No one at present, however, proposes to abolish the law against Sunday trading with its statutory punishment, the stocks.

It is clear, then, that we must not look upon an existing code of morals as adequate or right merely because it has been of long standing and has been handed down to us by our fathers who found that it served their purpose. On the contrary, a perpetual readjustment is essential, whereby the anachronisms of the rule under which we live may be eliminated. There is an argument

ready to the hand of any one who wishes to defend the existing conditions of society, an argument which, oddly enough, derives its force from the reasonings of Mr. Herbert Spencer. Mr. Spencer is so thoroughly committed to the cause of individualism that he would not interfere with the action of nature in regard to the main course of her developments. As he expresses it, the rule of the survival of the fittest must work freely in order to secure what nature requires; and this belief has led him to oppose with all the strength of his strong will the principles which lie at the base of socialism, if socialism (which is a vague term) be taken as the antithesis to individualism. That way, however, runs a return to the ancient dogma that whatever is is right. And it is easy to see how the argument may be employed in favor of the perfection of the ruling code of morals, or to speak more correctly, against any interference with that code. The error seems to me to lie in a confusion of mind which would dissociate the enthusiasms and yearnings of the human spirit from any relation with organic life. To the civilization of the middle ages with its inherent cruelties and superstitions arrives some prophet, who preaches a better way. It will hardly be seriously contended that the prophet has no right to interfere because he is interrupting the law of nature. He is part of nature himself and in consequence, in so far as he is effective in his crusade, the revolution of which he is the author is part of evolution. The same truth holds to-day, and those who can persuade the body of the nation out of an inveterate habit of belief are in no wise interfering with natural law. It is true, on the other hand, that if the popular will successfully resists, that result is again in keeping with the course which evolution has mapped out. The individualist, therefore, is at liberty to oppose the principles of socialism to the uttermost, but he is not at liberty to suggest that they are inconsistent with the purpose of nature, which not only is responsible for the elaboration of the world as we know it, but will have to determine the future of a world which we may not forecast. If socialism were to triumph—collectivism, horrid as is the word, is probably a more definite title—the triumph would mark a new and predestined stage in the world's history, a stage higher or lower, but still a stage in advance and on the road to something else. Surely, then, it comes to this, that we, all and each of us, may shout loudly for what we consider to be right,

and that perhaps to none of us shall it be revealed whether what he has urged is good or bad, even if it be successful and secure the adherence of his neighbors.

If there is anything in the considerations which I have set down, all that is proved is surely this: that it is permissible to discuss the canons of current morality without fear and without prejudice. It is apparent that we have outgrown many of these, and it may be that we have developed beyond almost all. And I conceive that there is but one way to discover how little or how much we have gone astray; and that is as a preliminary to make out a definite standard of morals to which we may refer our rules and actions. To elaborate a serious code which should apply in detail to every available circumstance of life would be a far more ambitious task than this short paper designs. But I propose to endeavor to formulate a large principle of morals and to take a few examples thereafter as illustrations of its application, in the hope that this course may be suggestive, if nothing more. The correspondence of nature is so large and generous that we may forget it is also so careless and so cruel. We are fitted into our places with a rough hand; the largess of gifts is poured upon us; we are tended not unkindly, but with unparticularizing zeal. Nature gardens on so vast a scale that many grow up and many die, and there is no room in her heart for compassion for the dead. It is with the living that she is concerned, and most of all with those who, keeping nearest to her rude orders, draw therefrom a strong life. She rewards lavishly those who survive to do her credit. And the laws she has imposed form a body of morals which must be the basis of any successful ethical system.

This congruity of man with the laws and exactions of nature is the prime factor in determining his health and happiness. There is no room for any difference of opinion on this particular point. But it is more than that; there is a deeper significance in the proposition. A close observation of the progress of organic life in these terrestrial fields discovers two important facts: the one, that nature desires an advance upon lines of her own, such as she has achieved in aeons of the past; the other, that she benevolently rewards all acts and habits that assist such an advance. Kant proposed as a test of any action or system of ethics that we should consider this question: Could this be made a universal rule, applicable to all mankind? If this query were answerable

in the affirmative, according to Kant the act or system might be taken as moral. Kant, however, wrote before the heyday of natural science, and wove his theories out of the fine-spun yarn of his brain. We stand upon firmer ground now through the offices of innumerable thinkers and patient observers, most of them long since dust and ashes with the German. Yet it is to the credit of that fine mind that the newer test does not wholly conflict with his own. It is, indeed, reconcilable with the older theory. For nature makes this postulate, that that must be deemed moral which, if applied at large, will consist with her schemes and tend to the general and particular advances at which she is aiming. Nature aims high, and the rewards of those who fall in with her aims is that they shall live healthily and happily. They that will not must pay the penalty, though the penalty may be long delayed, even till the third and fourth generation. The tragedy of life is that there is no account taken of individuals; it is the stream of tendency that matters. Fate waits so long and works so patiently that centuries elapse ere her results are seen. Yet it is certain that no man and no race of men may enter upon a conflict with nature with any hope of success. She has one end for such—extermination, or such oblivion as comes of inglorious decrepitude, of shameful degradation. The wages of sin against her is death; yet, as in the case of her rewards, she visits not always the individual. Whether she has penalties or benefits to offer, she prefers to deal with the race. It is the race that she pays and punishes most generously; it is the individual she tends to neglect. She pays him at once, after long years, not at all, as some careless employer who deals with large figures and great numbers, who in the “operation” of big transactions cannot be bothered with details.

According to this version of philosophy, then, morality is to be measured by the extent of our agreement with the plans of nature. The full design of those plans it is not possible to guess, yet, as we have seen, the general outline is deducible. But as a matter of fact a prevision of the future is not demanded of us, but only to obey definite rules which have dominated the processes of nature since we have been able to observe them. In the protrusion of man from the organic world a stage in evolution has been reached which, however magnificent, is not final. Life has sat down in a half-way house and presently shall resume its journey.

Indeed, this is a mere figure of speech, as there is, and can be, no interruption in its course. The recklessness of the process by which the ultimate goal is to be gained can be gauged from the monstrous sacrifices it entails. No Juggernaut car rolled over living and sensible bodies so wantonly or so indifferently. For life and death are but the counters with which some vast game is played above us, beyond all, and seeming to these poor mortal eyes to be at once cruel and ineffectual. The material with which she is able to make her experiments is so rich and abundant that nature is spendthrift, neither hoards nor spares, and like a barbaric general will throw away innumerable pawns to gain her objective. What is death to us is but part of her game. So that the long reaches of history before history was recorded are dotted with the relics of myriads of experiments, myriads of failures, myriads of false types. Most of these creatures which were tentative essays towards the construction of man have perished long since; the survivors are even now diminishing; the fortune by which the human creature is at last placed dominant upon the earth and hunts the lower beasts to death marks only the culmination of that system of obliteration which nature has always reserved for her failures. The culmination? No. For the process, as I have said, is by no means at an end; and as man has been chosen from the ranks in which he once was merely a unit, so too from the gradually diverging races of man shall one be chosen to the exclusion of the others. Nature, in short, will continue to pick, and the best of us will still be chosen, as were the best of the anthropoid creatures at some long-distant point of time. There is here, no doubt, a lesson of vital consequence for the nations of the earth; but at the moment it is too large a question, and I am now considering rather morality in its relation to the internal economy of the state. Let us see how the rule which has been laid down will work out in one or two important particulars.

If we accept as a fact this demand on the part of nature (that is, of those forces which are developing the universe) that we must live in congruity with her, the acceptance necessitates a general and ruthless clearance of the laws, beliefs and customs which derive from other and alien rules. And it is unfortunate that the bulk of our morality and our public opinion is based upon other arguments, has come out of a remote past, and ven-

erable by such descent wears yet the scars and patches of long service. The common sense of generation after generation has shaped these bonds about the race, both visible and invisible, into some practical agreement with the changing civilization. Yet the liberties taken with these laws and customs have been slight, and have indeed been limited to such modifications as conserved an appearance of harmony and prevented a monstrous antagonism between public law and public sentiment. Perhaps in no way has the inheritance of erroneous traditions, inconsistent with what I have called the proper base of morality, been more pernicious than in determining the relative values of death and pain. The common opinion of the day tends to assert that, whereas death is an evil to be avoided, pain is a discipline, a means of education, an ultimate good. The verdict of natural morality is the reverse; for while nature offers to us death as a refuge, as the final grave of our troubles, she abhors pain and spares us what she may. Indeed, that gift of death is for the release from pain and is made in a kindly spirit. She has no further use for us; we are broken and done with. Very well; there is left that irrevocable silence in which neither will the mind revolve upon itself with interminable sadness, nor the nerves and sinews throb and ache in that quiet heap of corrupting dust.

The aim of Christianity has been to transfigure death; to represent that last act in which the living body takes part as a radiant change which the soul is right to anticipate with longing and to welcome with gladness. In that restitution which will characterize a celestial life the Christian religion sees the justification and the explanation of this bewildering sojourn on earth. And death, thus interpreted and so glorified, should be to Christians nothing but a blessing, a gift, a gate out of all sorrows. Yet it cannot be said with any truth that modern sentiment regards it in this light. The growth of pity has increased with it the fear of death, and it is probable that man's faith is not now so vivid or so strong as to prevail against the terrors which have been sedulously fostered in his heart for generations. For death itself is nothing; it is the shadow of death that terrifies. "I have seen many men die," said a well-known doctor, "and after thirty years I have come to the conclusion that it hurts about as much as being born." And there is what I would come to; for it is pain and only pain that matters, whether pain be mental or physical.

When I claim death as a positive benefit for the individual I am not doing so out of a wanton fancy for a paradox. For so long as life is good, so long, that is, as the balance is in favor of happiness, for so long will death remain an unnecessary evil. And even beyond that stage, when the scales have kicked the beam and there seems surely no more to wait for in this world, even then hope steps in and stays the desperate hand. The future which is unknown is always more vast and more possible than the past which is familiar; and out of that illusive void the human spirit will bravely shape promises for itself until the crisis is past and the scale returns to balance. The aim of the life, if it would do what nature desires for it, should be the avoidance of pain and the acceptance of death in due season. A proper system of morals should educate us for this end. The scheme of philosophy in which pain is regarded as a disciplinary force and, therefore, a blessing seems to me by the light of these principles to be as false as that which would terrify us with the shadow of death. Nature desires a happy life, for it is only by full living that the creatures which she is molding can be improved. As for pain, it has been established undoubtedly in the interests of the creature, and not for his punishment or discipline. Pain is a very blunt signal of danger which is meant as a guide. The nerves which conduct that sensation to the centre of feeling lie for the most part upon the surface where they may the more easily give warning. To scrape the surface of the flesh hurts more than to cut deeply into the tissues. There is, therefore, no moral or philosophic use of pain in all this. It is a practical contrivance of the most ordinary utility, and the less occasion human creatures, or any other creatures, have to experience it the better for them. By that conservation of placid happiness is the fulness of life consummated. In truth, if we are looking about for a philosophy, that in which the greatest amount of unnecessary pain is averted would seem to be, on the whole, the highest and best we may obtain. The rule of the savage world is framed upon a different postulate, and even the practice of the civilized territories partakes of that ancient tradition of cruelty. It is likely that the active taste for cruelty has been evolved among races by accident from some condition which at one time served a useful purpose in the body politic. According to the scheme of nature no unnecessary infliction of pain was admissible, yet incidentally a

positive taste for pain has developed; and it is possible that the tortures of the red Indians may be parallel with the ruthless treatment of the mouse by the cat. The desire to avenge a wrong was, doubtless, quite necessary in the original and rudimentary society, since only by such wild instincts was the society capable of being preserved. Yet we have now outlived that period and entrusted our quarrels to the placid hands of the law. Justice, nevertheless, remains vindictive and is directed in many cases not to the utilitarian end of preventing crime, but to the barbarous object of avenging it. At the same time the sentimental theory of life, which would underestimate the effects of pain and exalt death to the heights of tragedy, is busy amongst us. These dual principles go right through our criminal law. For example, a lunatic who commits a murder is confined during His Majesty's pleasure, whereas a man of sound intelligence is hanged. According to a saner view the lunatic would be hanged (or otherwise disposed of) along with the ordinary criminal. Again, there are many things worse than the infliction of death. If a man should be killed to-day, it would entail less suffering than if he should lie racked on a bed of pain for years or find his strength and health ebb from him step by step, or, once more, than if he should be subject to the exactions and terrors of blackmail over a term of years. But public opinion and the law will not recognize that blackmail, or, say, adulteration of food and wine, are as heinous offenses as murder. The bare fact is that they are far worse judged from the standpoint I have indicated. They are the cause of *greater pain*. There is in Great Britain and elsewhere a vigorous minority which agitates for the abolition of capital punishment, on the ground that it is merely a survival of barbarism to take life in exchange for life. The question of capital punishment, however, will scarcely be determined on such grounds. Any one may suspect that the movement has its origin rather in a sentimental dread of death. In Italy, where the capital penalty is abolished, a far worse (and a more costly) punishment awaits the assassin, who is confined solitary in a cell until his reason is endangered. Of the two retributions there can be no doubt which is the more severe; yet the object of society should be to restrain a dangerous man from homicide—an object which would be most easily attained by his execution. The infliction of pain is unnecessary; the extinction of death is desirable. The law acts as

if the reverse were true. We may take it that the law rarely intervenes to spare pain, but invariably to protect from death and the loss of property. Being derived from a more primitive society it is not adjusted to our later needs and higher requirements and the conservative character of society maintains and defends the incongruity.

The round world is built upon a series of conventions which are crumbling and decayed, but are still held sacred; yet there is no hope that we may better this condition by the aid of the "faddist." What are we to do with the vegetarian who denies the right of the *carnivore* to take the life of the lower animals? He is fitted with teeth which give the lie to his own arguments, yet he will persist in regarding that as cruel which is only the behest of a dispassionate nature. One particular form of cruelty practiced by law and custom in our occidental civilization is the refusal to allow a man to command his own life. He may do what he will with his property, he may even to a large limit deal with his children as he will, but to be the master of his own life is forbidden him. That which is drawn reluctant and unconscious out of an abysmal past may not have the privilege of laying down that gift which it has never sought, but is bound reluctant to a reluctant and ungracious world when every bond between them is broken and dissolved. There exists still that most barbarous usage by which a coroner's jury has the choice of two verdicts upon a suicide, and one of these pronounces that he who has preferred death deliberately is matter for anathema—should be treated as carrion and denied all kindly offices and rites. Yet surely the desire of death must be so unnatural that to seek it must of itself prove life to be intolerable. Nature has no need of those who find life too difficult. The very fact should engage her assistance in parting the slender links, and the nausea of life which comes to some in certain conditions is, no doubt, intended as the prelude and incentive to the final relief. Of course, I am considering not a mere whim on the part of any emotional person, but a settled state of mind, deliberate and definite. There are hospitals in every civilized community; there are workhouses. Is it beyond the dreams of kindness that there should also be a House of Death, a hostelry into which those weary of the world or themselves should be received as into a lodging against the darkness, a half-way house to the eternal silence? A proper course of care and

discipline might fitly serve as a test between those who have real ground for their dislike of life and those who have jumped lightly at a release which they do not need. Yet there is a class of suffering which receives even less consideration at the hands of our merciless humanity than that which would culminate in suicide from weariness of life or complexity of outlook. I refer to cases of incurable and painful disease. It is satisfactory that medical skill is able in these days to mitigate the pains of such as are afflicted with these, yet it would be more consistent with natural justice and morality that they should have the power of terminating their own sufferings by death. A consultation, very grave and solemn, the consent of the sufferer—these might well be the prelude to swift and painless euthanasia.

The purblindness of law and custom to the claims of real justice and kindness is marked in many aspects of our modern life. False ideals, which are false idols, still rule our habits, our thoughts and our consciences. *Genus infelix humanum*, we are unable to throw off that old ancestral yoke under which we have been bowed so long that we are even unaware of the subjugation. The Anglo-Saxon race is in the main a just race in its dealings, desirous of the right, and following what seem the dictates of duty. A little cold and unimaginative, more than a little patient, this northern blood so felicitously fused in the course of history has derived from its stock a belief in the rights of others as well as a dependence on its own judgments. Both that fairness and that obstinacy are rooted deeply in our nature, and the two qualities, clashing as they not infrequently do, produce in our national character strange inconsistencies. It is by reason of this that we are wrongly charged with hypocrisy by foreign critics. We are not hypocrites, but only a trifle unimaginative and a good deal more conservative in our ways. It is an anomaly traceable to the conflict I have mentioned that in England to-day the tenderest consideration for the animal world co-exists with the most brutal disregard of animal sufferings. The death of a cat or dog, adequately related, will cause emotion in the hearts of the audience; yet some of these may run behind hounds to-morrow, and unblushingly accept the tail of an unhappy victim. The outcry against bull-fights on the Continent seems at once amazing and amusing to those who have witnessed the terror, exhaustion and despair of the hunted quarry in the national sport of Eng-

land. In that moment of its final agony it is probable that the fox suffers the extreme of suffering that the animal world is capable of. Cock-fighting has been abolished, and yet it is quite clear that the cocks at least did not object to the duel, whereas hare and fox certainly cannot be said to enjoy the chase. In brief, to bring these remarks in line with the thesis, the sports are not put to the test of pain, which is the only test of importance, which is indeed the one test exacted by nature.

The dullness of the human mind to the importance of pain and the insignificance of death is very manifest in our attitude to the crimes of murder and dishonesty, to which I have already referred. If we judge by the test of pain, we must revise our code of crimes and penalties; for that will not seem the worst offense which really is so. More harm is wrought by dishonesty than by a solitary act of violence which results in death. The swindler, the rascally operator in stocks, the purveyor of bad food, the adulterator, the cheating contractor, the landlord who avoids his responsibilities, the dishonest plumber—all these are the cause of far greater suffering than the man who shoots his comrade in angry brawl. Yet we are unwilling to accept this as the case, and it is probable that many generations will come and go before the law and the sanctions of the law are applied upon this first principle. The history of the past will, no doubt, be repeated in the history of the future. The course of evolution is forward always, is not dammed even when it appears so, and we are at this moment undergoing a change "into something rich and strange." One property of the social state which the new creature will inhabit will certainly be a higher morality. It is not so very long ago—the middle ages—that the wanton destruction of life was scarcely considered as a crime. It was no doubt very stupid and unnecessary for a lord to shoot his serfs or bondmen, but neither law nor moral sense regarded this act as a heinous offense. With the passage of centuries the crime of murder has grown in blackness, not only to the eye of justice but to the popular sense. Consequently an inherent and abiding instinct against murder has been developed in the conscience of the northern nations at any rate. It is reasonable to expect that a similar course of development will be followed in the case of other offenses against society. The appreciation of the importance of pain in a system of morals has dawned upon us late, and has required subtler senses. If we

once recognize that pain is the immortal enemy and that the battle must be waged against it, and if we are able to adjust our minds so that we see death in a proper perspective, we shall be on the highway to a better moral system and a happier social state. The victories of the past have been great and arduously achieved and they were won by those who were scarcely conscious that they were struggling, who certainly were ignorant of the end for which they fought. Peace is not yet, for peace is when change ceases, and change may never cease "till all change end." So we may be encouraged by the past in the future, and if we may fix however roughly upon the goal to which nature desires to direct our footsteps, that ideal in our minds may serve to help us and the great cause of human progress.

H. B. MARRIOTT-WATSON.